

MARKETING OF CHINESE TARO IN LOS ANGELES

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Abstract

Hawaii grown Chinese taro is in high demand in West Coast markets. Disease-free and year-round taro supply in addition to product identification are pre-requisites in establishing a market and meeting foreign competition. Agricultural economists, extension specialists, growers, local handlers, and shippers must all work as closely as possible to develop a positive attitude. It is a team effort.

Quality

From my interviews with the fresh taro buyers in the West Coast, they all expressed a preference for the Hawaii grown Chinese taro (Bun Lan Woo) over the Dominican Republic imports. The Dominican Republic taro has been considered their second choice or a substitute for the Hawaii grown taro. When asked about taste, all of the buyers expressed that the Hawaii grown Chinese taro has a unique aroma, firm texture, and attractive purple colored specks within the corms. The Dominican taro has none of these attributes.

Availability

Because Chinese taro from Hawaii is not available throughout the year, the market in Los Angeles will depend on imported taro from the Dominican Republic. The amount of taro imported from the Dominican Republic is sizable but the quality is not up to par. Los Angeles buyers are forced to buy Dominican Republic taro because it's the only game in town. Consumers will gradually become accustomed to the Dominican Republic taro making the current marketing situation very critical for Hawaii growers!

Pricing

Hawaii air-flown taro has a higher price than taro shipped by boat. However, I do not advise you to ship taro by Matson containers to Los Angeles because taro doesn't have a long post-harvest shelf life. Buyers in Los Angeles look for taro quality. Years ago, nobody shipped taro by Matson containers. Now, with the two different prices for Hawaii Chinese taros (one for air-shipped and one for boat-shipped), there is confusion not only in the minds of the buyers and produce managers, but in the minds of the consumers as well.

Packing and Shipping Improvements

Hawaii grown Chinese taro are shipped in green or red vegetable bags. Los Angeles buyers always associate Hawaii grown Chinese Taro with the bag color. It would be a good idea to have product labels attached to bags identifying Hawaii grown taro. Some wholesalers even try to pack Dominican taro in green bags, giving it the grown in Hawaii appearance. Packing in boxes would also help as it reduces handling damage and is easier to market.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Quality:

With the increase in southeast Asian immigrants (the main consumers of Hawaii grown taro) to North America, Chinese taro (from anywhere) will be in high demand. In order for Hawaii to be a leader in this market, disease-free taro is a must.

Attitude and Team Effort:

Agricultural economists, extension specialists, growers, local handlers, and shippers must all work as closely as possible. A positive attitude must be developed. It must be a team effort.

Competition:

In order to meet the demand of the Los Angeles market, a year-round availability plan must be developed. This is the most effective way of meeting (and possibly beating) foreign competition.

Promotion:

In promoting Hawaii-grown Chinese taro:

- a. A well designed Hawaii-grown Chinese taro label should be attached to each bag to develop a brand concept.
- b. Develop a booklet of taro featuring "Why Buy Hawaii Grown Chinese Taro"; in Chinese also.
- c. Run newspaper and radio campaigns in Los Angeles.
- d. Free trips to Hawaii for buyers and managers of companies that sell Hawaii taros.

Improvements on Post-harvest Management:

Improvements for grading, packing, handling, and shipping are needed. Vacuum cooling may be an alternative treatment.

Development of New Markets and Specialty Crops for Hawaii Farmers

There is a Canadian market that would want fresh taro. Also in good demand are herbs, bamboo shoots, guava, leechi, lotus roots, and leaf mustards. In order to develop and be established in this market, all of the above recommendations outlined need to be accomplished.

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